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COMBAT EXPERIENCE, CROSS TRAINING KEYS TO RECENT TRAINING FOR V CORPS' 1ST ARMORED DIVISION

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As one of their unit platoon sergeants (at right) watches and evaluates, a trio Soldiers from V Corps' Company A, 1st Battalion, 37th Armor, 1st Armored Division prepare to advance during urban combat training at the Friedberg (Germany) Training Area during exercise Ready Crucible.

FRIEDBERG, Germany – The rattle and pop of small arms and machine gun fire shatter the crisp silence of a frosty February morning in the foothills of the Taunus Mountains in the German state of Hessen. Along the former Roman frontier, modern mounted warriors from the 1st Battalion, 37th Armored Regiment of V Corps' 1st Armored Division train, adapting the lessons learned from combat in the sand of a nation where the Romans

also once walked -- Iraq.

Leaving their M1A1 Abrams tanks under evergreen cover in the forests of Friedberg Training Area, the "Bandits" of the 1-37th fight as the Romans did, too – they dismount and assault the enemy on foot.

"Dismounted operations is something new for tankers," said 1st Lt. Jonathan

Villasenor, executive officer, Company A, 1-37th. Making use of Military Operations

in Urban Terrain facilities at FTA, the Bandits practiced techniques for entering and searching structures in a hostile environment.

Inching slowly forward through the wood line, the “Axemen” of Company A prepare to rush a building. A few Soldiers remain hidden, providing cover for their comrades who burst from relative safety to the back of a cinderblock structure.

Shots ring out and Bandits flatten themselves against muddy earth or the cold stone walls. Their steaming breath clouds the chilled air as they gather their wits and prepare to enter the building’s only doorway.

Supporting fire erupts from the wood line, suppressing the waiting enemy. The Bandits make their move and assault the entrance.

Again and again, this scene repeats itself as Bandits hone skills that are traditionally associated with infantrymen or combat engineers. The training was part of the division’s recent exercise Ready Crucible.



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A Soldier from V Corps' Company A, 1st Battalion, 37th Armor, 1st Armored Division advances carefully on a building during urban combat training at the Friedberg (Germany) Training Area during exercise Ready Crucible.

“This training is really intense and fast,” said Pfc. Ellery Majalca, a Bandit M1A1 driver. “They should really implement this at OSUT.”

OSUT, or One Station Unit Training, is a combination of basic and advanced individual training that brand-new tankers go through at Fort Knox, Ky. Infantry Soldiers also receive OSUT training at Fort Benning, Ga., but there is a different

focus for those initial-entry infantry Soldiers – a focus that many tankers have adopted after their experiences in Iraq.

“It’s not tanker stuff, but it’s fundamental,” said Lt. Col. Garry Bishop, Bandit commander and veteran of combat in Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Other members of the Bandit team watch over their comrades from the turrets of their 72-ton rolling fortresses, which have now crept to the outskirts of the mock village. Although the Bandits are going in on foot, they aren’t without an intimidating big brother as backup.

“Shock effect -- that’s what it is,” Bishop explained to his troops during an after-action review designed to highlight the positives of a particular exercise and examine what could have been done better.

“Tanks surrounding a building, leveling their 120mm guns on them, gives the enemy pause to decide if they really want to fight or not.”



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Pvt. Sam Kennedy and Sgt. 1st Class William Thompson prepare to roll out with the rest of Company A's 1st Platoon during training with the 1st Battalion, 37th Armored Regiment of V Corps' 1st Armored Division on the Friedberg Training Area, as part of the division's Ready Crucible exercise.

Integrating and adapting every piece of equipment the Bandit Battalion has at its disposal is a key focus of this type of training.

“You have the 240B dismount kits,” said Bishop. “Use them.”

The 7.62mm 240B machine gun mounted atop the Abrams at the loaders hatch can be quickly dismounted and adapted to an infantry-style weapon capable of providing rapid suppressive fire in support of troops moving from building to building.

“Don’t think this is infantry stuff and you don’t have to learn it, because you do,” Bishop pointedly told his Soldiers.



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Lt. Col. Garry Bishop (left), commander of the 1st Battalion, 37th Armor of V Corps' 1st Armored Division, reviews his troops' performance during an after-action review after Military Operations in Urban Terrain training on the Friedberg (Germany) Training Area, as part of the division's Ready Crucible exercise.

Even as the Bandits prepare for the possibilities of low-intensity urban combat, they remain focused on the high-intensity spectrum for which tanks are designed.

Mounting up and rolling out from FTA, the Bandits and their supporting elements from the division's Company B,

16th Engineer Battalion, 501st Forward Support Battalion and 2nd Battalion, 3rd Field Artillery Regiment convoyed tactically over the Taunus range to the outskirts of the small German village of Wuerges.

Most maneuver training takes place at the Combat Maneuver Training Center in Hoehenfels, Germany, but this sort of exercise has a different flavor than the force-on-force simulations held “inside the box” at CMTC.

In Wuerges, the maneuver culminated in a breach exercise designed to test Bandits' ability to surmount high-intensity conflict obstacles. But along the way, tactically

navigating the small streets of German villages provided challenges similar to those faced in Iraq.

Maneuvering outside “the box” provides a realistic challenge of command and control over long distances, said Capt. Joseph Albrecht, commander of Company A’s Axemen. Along with realistic movement comes the element of surprise, as the Bandits lead tank was struck by a simulated improvised explosive device, better known to OIF veterans as an IED – a homemade bomb.

This type of training is now standard for Army units, because one of the lessons of OIF is that no Soldier is immune to an IED. Reacting to an ambush of this type provides Soldiers an opportunity to train for that possibility and others.

Combat medic Staff Sgt. Gustavo Hernandez, another combat veteran of OIF, said cross-training everyone on his M113 armored personnel carrier to take on any position on the team is his primary focus.

“Everyone on the track needs to be able to fill in and do everyone’s job,” explained Hernandez. Drawing on his combat experiences, Hernandez said he believes in providing his Soldiers the most realistic training.

This exercise “was kind of like a rush back to a combat experience,” said Hernandez. “When we received the message, it sounded like the real thing.” Imparting this sense of urgency to his Soldiers, Hernandez believes, is the way to train.

"Take everything for real," he said. "When it happens for real, you already (have) everything set up and ... your mind set up on what you are going to do. That's the way I want my guys to train."

